WAKE UP

Volume Two of Thirteen:

Twenty Thousand and Twenty-Six, Winterstime

Entrances uncovered
street signs you never saw

all entrances delivered—
courtesy winter.

—*MARK E. SMITH*

W A X E N

THE WHITWORTH SHEARING — parts 1 to 3 of a poem by Daniel Roop

UNDERRADARIMAGESORIGIN — art by David-Baptiste Chirot

I N N O C E N C E — art by Sarah Yount-Moser

S T A T I C — a story by James Cannice

P A I N — art by Anthony Christopher

RETURN TO SENDER — a story by Arvee Fantilagan

CONVERSATIONS WITH MY BROTHER — part one of a series by Lucia Castro

W I N D O W S — art by Rafael Camilo

A DAY, A LACK — a story by Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece

FROG MOUTH — art by Jayden Wood

THE COLD MOON CROWN — a story by Jack Fennell

ASKIN' WAYNE — advice from 'Waxen' Wayne

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THE WHITWORTH SHEARING

1. Not Russian Dolls At All

Stories
nest inside stories nest
inside

the woods outside Whitworth,
Vermont, winter, snow falling
layer upon layers as though
the world was a secret
to be kept
from itself.

Stories nest
inside stories nest inside
us. In the cabin, a pen
scratches across parchment,
black ink on the yellow page.

Bad poets borrow,
Good poets steal.
Eternal poets ravage
and eat the red revealed.

Stories nest inside
stories nest—and it's tempting,
of course, to reach
for the easy metaphor—
Russian dolls,

symmetrically nestled
with their painted smiles,
harmoniously hollow,
a conjoined collective.

But stories
are not predictable duplicates.
They shift, they send out
tendrils. They invade.
The better metaphor
is a cuckoo.

One story begins
inside another
innocently enough, then
grows and grows, until
the writer and reader
find the original simply
won't hold the bloated offspring and it spills
over, claiming the world
for itself.

Deep in the woods outside Whitworth,
in the candlelit cypress cabin,
someone writes the first line
and smiles at what they know.

Someone writes the last line,
and smiles at what's to come.

Whose woods these are
you think you know.

You'll find you are
mistaken, though.

2. Pericope Books, The Night as Question

Whitworth, 1974, a small and solid town, the local arts scene a feverish splash of golden-green against February slush. Pericope Books sphinxed at the corner of the town square, windows glowing, the orange eyes of a tortoiseshell cat in the snow, as it was snowing, as it was going to snow.

Collectible first editions stood upright, proud leather spines next to dog-eared paperback pulps. Magazines from decades past piled on the floor. Plush chairs for perusing filled the center of the room. But on the night in question

every chair's occupant had an upturned face, flowers seeking sun. Every pair of hands clutched the same book. Every mouth whispered the same name as he stepped to the podium beside the weathered cypress author's table: Mardrosk.

F.R. Mardrosk looked exactly like someone who would choose Mardrosk for a nom de plume, exactly like someone who would say nom de plume instead of pen name, exactly like someone who celebrated and sang himself.

He gestured to the table, covered with hardcover stacks of The Eighth Offering to the Orthonal, the final volume in his self-published fantasy series. He spoke, his voice warm bourbon and oak ash. "I'm elated to be here with you, elated to finish the great work."

Only one eyewitness account exists, from Bethany Jorgensen who, being deaf, was spared what followed.

3. Tendrils

Two roads diverged, one south, one north
with unseen thousands branching off.

We view the twain and call it truth
but endless subpaths spread their roots.

The surface simple, clean, and clear,
Let's just pretend that's all that's here.

Forget Edwina's ink-stained hands
Or Noomi's dark, fantastic lands.
Forget old Elke's words of power
And little Manon's final hour.

Return to Whitworth, gawk and stare.
This story only happens there.

STATIC

Your loving husband kisses your knuckles and squeezes your fingers. Your heartbeat flatlines, and you die, peacefully.

For a while, you see only black. It feels as if you've just closed your eyes, though you are sure you are dead. You felt your skin lose all feeling, everything inside your body wither and waste.

Ah yes, you are only a soul now. You're in the tunnel, and now all you need to do is find the light at the end of it. It is oh-so-faint in the distance, but there, there it is. You move toward it, slowly. With some effort, as if the darkness had a riptide, you push forward. And maybe your soul is heavier than you thought it would be. And maybe the light in the distance isn't as bright as it should be. Not as pure.

Before you can see the light very clearly, you realize that your current state feels almost heavier than your body did, even at the end of your life. Odd, but maybe you are just getting used to being bodiless.

Soon, you see that the light you are reaching for is not the end of the tunnel, is not an entrance into something wonderful. It is static on an old TV screen.

A dread slithers through you. Whatever you are now has become so heavy, you have no choice but to fall and sit on the recliner that materializes underneath you.

Stare at the static on the television. It's the only light in the darkness.

The static illuminates traces of what appears to be a woman standing just next to the television. You can't make out much of her, only that she stands rigid, unsmiling. In the dark, it almost appears as if she has no eyes. She lifts her hand to adjust the dial on the TV. Her fingers are pale purple.

The TV, eventually, finds a signal. First, the fuzz from the speakers melts into the sound of rain. Then, you see, on the screen,

a familiar road—a freeway you used to take back home. It's late on a stormy night, and your husband is driving the old truck. You, only a few decades younger than you are now, are in the passenger seat. The younger you is nearly nodding off when the car's high beams catch a figure on the side of the road.

Your husband starts to slow the car down to get a better look at the scene: a girl sticking her thumb out. Her hair is long, too long, straight and black and unkempt. Part of it gets in the way of her eyes; you barely register her as a person. Her body is all angles, and she is skinny, wilting like a dying flower. It's a miracle she hasn't been washed away by the rain.

You, even beyond your death, remember her. You remember you were scared of her, didn't want to let her in the car. You felt like something terrible might happen if you did. But your husband, the good Samaritan he was, slowed the truck to a stop. You protested, asked what he was thinking.

"Oh hush, darling," he said. "A twig thing like that won't hurt us."

You sighed, gripping tightly to your door handle, as your husband rolled down the window and told the girl to hop in the back.

She was quiet, but she got in the car. You looked at her through the rearview mirror, saw the gaunt in her cheeks. In that moment, you felt guilty for being afraid of her.

Her name was Cass. She was headed to Athens, but that was hundreds of miles away, and it was much too late at night.

"How about this..." your husband said. "It's quite late to be out and about, so how about we get you some food in your belly and a place to sleep for the night? We were on our way home anyway, and it's just a few miles down the road."

Neither you nor Cass said anything.

"You can stay in our son's room. He's off in college and I'm sure he won't mind."

It took a while, but Cass agreed. You watched as she played with the wooden owl pendant hanging from her neck. It had plastic glass eyes and one of its ears was chipped off.

You no longer want to watch the memory on the screen so you turn away, look around the darkness, but that's all there is. Darkness so deep and complete that you question if anything else ever even existed.

The woman beside the television taps the screen, demands you return your attention to it. So, you do.

When you got home, Cass dripped all over the carpet. You took her denim jacket to hang up to dry and gave her an old sweater. In the warm light, she was still pale, but looked more like a girl and less a creature of the night. Couldn't have been more than 19, 20. As she shivered, she looked up at you, eyes asking if she could trust you.

For a moment, the television's audio cuts out and the video freezes on a frame of Cass's eyes.

You reheated some rabbit stew while your husband set the bed. Cass wasn't very talkative, but that didn't stop your husband. He could talk anyone's ear off, and most the time they'd like him by the end. You heard him tell Cass some story about he tried running off when he was eight, how all he packed were some cereal bars and applesauce, how he got turned around at the cul-de-sac. The audio is a bit fuzzy, but maybe Cass chuckled.

Cass didn't say much as she ate, only told you and your husband that she had relatives down in Athens. Your husband slapped the table and said he had an idea: you two would get her a ticket and drop her off at the bus stop the next morning. She'd be in Athens by the evening and wouldn't have to rely on the kindness of strangers anymore. "It's a miracle you weren't picked up by a serial killer or some other thing bad."

She nodded, accepting the kindness of strangers.

After dinner, she fell asleep almost instantly, didn't even put the covers on. Your husband chuckled at the sight of her face down on your son's bed, underneath a poster of basketball shoes. He turned off the lights, slowly pulled the door back, left it ajar. He stared through the crack, and at first you thought he was making sure she wouldn't

all of a sudden get up and start robbing you. And maybe he lingered a little too long.

You didn't fall asleep easily that night. It's hard to tell if you fell asleep at all. Your husband slept as sound as the dead, but you tossed and turned all night, the feeling that something terrible would happen having returned with the flip of a light switch.

You watch your restless self for what must be hours, hoping she would get out of bed and do something.

In the morning, before Cass woke up, you made eggs and sausage. Your husband packed a brown baggie full of jerky, a PB&J, and some applesauce. With a black marker, he put a smiley face on the bag.

After breakfast, your husband told Cass that they had better leave soon to catch her bus. She looked to you again, asked if you were coming. She reached for the owl at her chest, brushed its ear with the tip of her thumb.

"Oh, my wife had trouble sleeping all night. The station's a good forty minutes away and, not that she doesn't love your company, but I'm sure she'd rather go back to bed."

Cass's eyes remained fixed on you.

You turn away from the TV. The woman in the dark jerks her head, taps the television with a finger that just might crack the screen.

You simply looked back at Cass, offered an easy smile.

"Oh you, rest up, darling," said your husband. "Cass and I should make it to the bus stop okay."

You nodded, and so did Cass. "Feel free to write us from Athens, you hear?" was the last thing you said to her.

After she and your husband left, you went to your recliner and turned on the television. You turned the volume louder than you had ever been comfortable with.

The camera slowly pulls away from you, leaves you alone in the living room, floats to your driveway, into the truck, where your husband stabs the key into the ignition, Cass in the passenger seat.

You turn your eyes away from the television, shut them for good measure, try to cover your ears. The woman in the dark is upon you as quickly as a preying spider. She rips your hands from off your ears. She presses her palms against the sides of your head, so hard she might slice your brain with shards of your skull, as she turns your face back to the television. With fingers sharp and ice-cold, she forces your eyes open.

"I didn't know," you say. "I didn't know, I promise." Your heart is rioting in your chest like it might give out and shouldn't you only be an immortal soul, now?

On the screen, your husband tells Cass stories from back in his little league days, tells her he's only been to Athens once but generally thought the folk were quite friendly.

You watch as, further down the road, your husband takes an exit you know won't take them to the city, would take them out to some backroads hardly anyone ever takes.

You watch as they keep driving. You watch as your oh-so-talkative husband stops talking, lets it be quiet because it's already done.

You watch as Cass tries to escape. You watch as your husband doesn't let her.

You watch as he kills her.

He returned to you, several hours later. He brought takeout, and you let that be a good enough explanation for all the time that had passed.

The woman releases your face and you shut your eyes, can't stop the tears flooding from them. "I couldn't have known."

You sound like a child caught misbehaving. You cover your face with one hand, clutch at your rupturing heart with the other.

You feel something heavy, pressing on your chest.

The woman taps the screen again, showing you a scene from a year or so later in your comfortable, peaceful life.

Your husband was doing the morning crossword. You were making coffee when he hopped out of his seat, said one of the answers in the puzzle reminded him of something. He ran to the closet, pulled out a little box to present to you. He said he saw it at some tchotchke shop and thought you might find it as darling as he did.

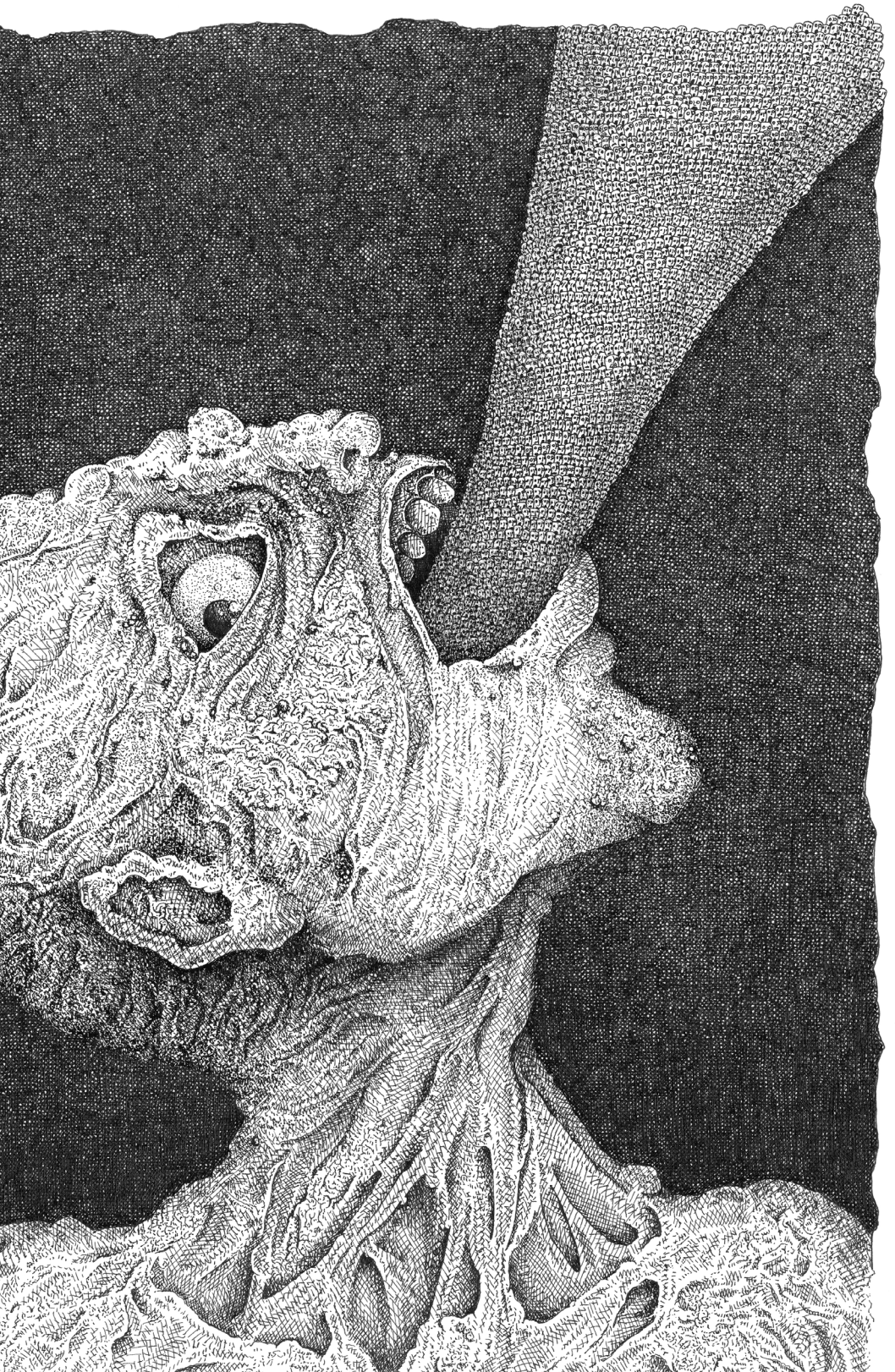
Inside was an owl pendant, one of the ears chipped off.

Over the years your husband gave you many little trinkets, odd pieces of jewelry. Many before Cass. Many after Cass.

The owl is strung around your neck, now. You grab it, try to rip it off, want to throw it and let the darkness erase it. But you can't. The string is stronger than your hand. And after a while, your soul no longer has the strength to fight it.

You let the owl stay. You hold it closer to your face, as if to make sure that it really is there, that it really is Cass's pendant. You're still staring at it when the woman turns off the television screen, and what little light you had fades away.

All you can do now is sit alone in the dark, waiting for your loving husband.



RETURN TO SENDER

>>>>>>GOOD EVENING, GOOD EVENING! Thank you, everyone! Welcome to the Latest Show!

<HOLD FOR REACTION>

My name is Poging Madaldal, and boy do we have a spectacle for you tonight! Live, unedited, and no holds barred: the man in the hottest seat in the land, President Nasan Pangulo!

<HOLD FOR REACTION>

That's right! As if he doesn't have a country to run!

<HOLD FOR REACTION>

And don't worry! In the worst case scenario, I've asked the First Lady very nicely and she pinky swore that my family could have my body back in time for Christmas. Unfortunately that means Dwight would have to take over the show, so yeah, I'm sorry about that.

<HOLD FOR REACTION, BANTER WITH DWIGHT>

But before that, we'll also have the president's faithful minion, Doctor Sana Sinungaling, from the Health Min—

<HOLD FOR REACTION>

Wow, listen to that! Lots of fans tonight of the Minister's Kamasutra demonstrations!

<HOLD FOR REACTION>

But I'm sorry to disappoint, folks. We'll probably just ask him if it's still safe to smoke cigarettes nowadays.

<HOLD FOR REACTION>

No, but seriously, have you guys seen those weird-ass trending videos? Anyone? Dwight, you seen them?

<HOLD FOR REACTION>

Apparently, people across the country have been vomiting clumps and clumps of cigarette butts!

<HOLD FOR REACTION>

I know! Holy smokes!

<HOLD FOR REACTION>

Some say it's a viral challenge, some say it's a viral disease. I'm sure most of us just want to say: just take the hint and quit already!

<HOLD FOR REACTION>

A spokesperson from Suave Lights even had to take a break from their own mandatory cigarette break to get on social media and deny any responsibility, claiming in a recent statement: 'No! We are not hiding extra cigarette butts deep inside your cigarettes' actual butts to make you sick! The nicotine is more than enough!'

I muted the TV and whispered a prayer.

I'd only heard about this a few days ago, and while the rest of the world thought the videos were hilarious, to me they were an omen. Of course, I'd already made up my mind to stop smoking before this all started happening, but even if I hadn't, I'm sure this trend, disease, phenomenon, whatever this was would've had me going cold turkey out of terror.

I just wish I'd quit sooner, before the first night I coughed up blood.

It had been over a month now, and my lungs had never felt cleaner, and my breathing never smoother. The problem was the rest of the world turning into mud. Workdays lasted twice as long. People would slur their words. The Internet had dried up of all amusement, and most of TV was an absolute slog.

All because I'd stopped huffing cigarettes.

So while I was glad to have dropped that addiction, I'd also been hunting for another.

Coffees still tasted like liquid rust, but they're the closest to giving me that old jolt. Energy drinks did, too, but I didn't want to hurt my liver on top of my lungs. Mints, candies, ice cream—God, the back of my teeth must look so horrid right now.

I'd considered vaping, but I always thought it was silly to quit sucking on poison only to pretend a cooler version was any better.

And, I swear to god, the next person to suggest that I just need to get laid would get my fist in their throat.

Still, they insisted, if not a boyfriend, I could at least find a companion. Some constant adorable presence around the house that could be my anchor. I wasn't really a fan, but after weeks of my brain freezing whenever I opened my inbox, I figured what the hell, might as well give it a try.

How hard could it be?

So I started looking up cute puppies for sale online.

>>>>>AND next we gotta talk about the crazy court battle over this crazy phenomenon that's got the whole country spicking and spanning!

And to do that, we have to go back to a few months ago, when posts first emerged of people puking stuff like cigarette butts or wads of gum, seemingly at random. And y'all remember how it looked like just another silly Internet trend, right? So even though many ended up limp and face-down on their own grisly pools of vomit, not many took it seriously.

That is until last month when an investor called Pera Anghabol sued the beverage company Inuman Bottlers for allegedly jumping on this bandwagon and endangering their customers. According to court documents, Mr Anghabol accuses Inuman factories of secretly loading their drinks with tiny chunks of metal that would clump together inside people's stomachs that they would be forced to regurgitate later.

Now folks, if you're thinking 'that doesn't make any sense at all!' then you might be a lawyer for Inuman Bottlers because that's exactly what their countersuit

boils down to. And to help their case, they compiled hours and hours of viral footage beyond those of kids barfing out random trash.

One of the nastiest we'd seen them highlight was this clip of an old man heaving and gagging in an ER somewhere, with his neck ballooning as something bulky slowly climbed up his throat. And you could see the anguish on his face! His cheeks get smothered in more and more of those gnarly sprawling veins, until his jaws get torn apart by a glass bottle that pushes out of his mouth.

So yeah, there was no way this could be a marketing stunt when everything about it defies logic in the first place!

Neither side seems to be backing down though, and social media continues to be flooded with people throwing up not only Inuman Bottlers' cans but also leaflets, red hats, and used condoms. Seriously.

In the meantime, I'm passing off the question to you all---what do YOU think of this? You think Mr Anghabol is wasting his time and money, because honestly, he might just be lashing out any way he could to make sense of all this craziness.

And from a broader sense, I'd love to hear your thoughts especially if you or anyone you know have experienced spewing solid objects. Did you feel like you deserved the pain? Have you changed how you behaved outdoors as a result? Do you regret your sins?

Personally though I'd be keeping my Mt Banahaw Pure Distilled Mineral Water bottles with me. They're clean, healthy, and even after drinking, you can just wash them and keep them in your fridge and—

I glanced up from the tablet just in time to catch my new corgi expelling her entire soupy lunch onto my freshly mopped floors.

The fucking bitch.

"Rindi!" I screamed (for the hundredth time in a day); the furry little monster immediately scampered off to whichever corner of the house it hides itself after biting my favorite sandals and committing other heinous property crimes.

God, I should've backed out when they first brought me this puppy. It turned out a lot uglier than its pictures. And so much yappier and noisier than I expected.

And all the damn fur!

I finally undersood why mom refused to get me a pet when I was a kid. I always begged for a baby goat—what was I thinking?

I got a puppy to relieve my stress over quitting smoking, but stressing over the little devil had just pushed me back to cigarettes, lungs be damned. I'd chain-smoked half a pack before lunch just so I wouldn't lose my mind over the mountains of black hair Rindi shed everywhere.

And now this repulsive pile on my floor made me want to reach for another pack.

On top of *that*, I now have to make sure to properly get every bit of ash, flake, and cigarette butt inside the bin so I don't attract whatever bad juju is making half the planet vomit at random these days.

I swear—Oh Christ, I hear that hairy banshee retching in the kitchen again.

Why couldn't it just hurl out its stomach already? I'm so sick of it gnawing on all my shoes, only to puke them out later with all the expensive dog slop I've been feeding it.

I should just starve the little ghoul and be done with it, but I bet it would make me rip off my ears first with its stupid hungry whining.

God, what a *mistake*.

>Oh, oh, speaking of—did you see those puking shareholders?

>>What? No!

>Holy shit, dude, it was bananas. Jimmy, pull up that board meeting video.

>>Oh, that board meeting? Yeah, I think I heard this on the news.

>Yep. Minahan Mining. Here we go.

>>Right, Minahan! I did hear their entire board was rushed to the hospital for food poisoning or something, but they didn't mention anything else except that their stocks tanked afterwards.

>Well, you'll see why. Remember, before this, it's only been teenagers and potheads that had been throwing up junk on social media. Well, there was that compilation for that court case, but—oh, here here, look at this shit.

>>…oh fuck!

>I know, right?"

>>They all really just started hunching over and collapsing at the same time, that's so creepy.

>Yeah, I don't think we'd seen this many people vomiting in one place before this.

>>God, that's disgusting!

>It's like they got fire hydrants inside them."

>>What are they puking?

>Definitely not candy wrappers, that's for sure. And by the way: they've been taking down almost every upload of this CCTV, so you know they've really done some shit they don't wanna explain."

>>I bet they were puking oil.

>Dude, that's what everyone's saying! And you know they had it coming, too. I still remember their recent statements bragging about their record profits even though they had that massive oil spill last year.

>>Heh, their staff is still trying to bandage their mouths, like yeah, that's gonna stop those black waterfalls! Haha. Whoops! Man down!

>HAHAHA! Just gets me how they slip all over each other's bile like they're in a mud festival or something haha.

>>Oh thank god they're bringing in the stretchers now. So what did the news say, did they—holy shit, is that a log coming out of that guy's mouth?!

I turned off the podcast so I could focus on the road. I was just driving here the other night, but I'll never get used to these slums, these mazes and mazes of dirty brick walls, tin roofs, and tarpaulin awnings that feel so glum.

I lit a cigarette, scanned the streets, and cursed again.

I remember it was just in front of one of these alleys, next to other mountains of garbage. The perfect spot, I thought at the time. The problem was that these dirty streets now all looked the same in the daylight, with the same hopeless faces shambling past them.

What the hell was I thinking driving all the way here? Who would've noticed anyway if I'd just dumped it outside our gated village?

And, oh god, what if it's already gone?

A jolt in my side sent me flinching. I gripped the wheel hard, my lips pursing in agony. It really was not just my imagination. Much like what all the survivors had said after their initial denials: the symptoms started showing by the second day.

Then as I winced from yet another stab to my liver, I finally saw the place.

I turned the car around and pulled up behind a dilapidated van. My gasps grew heavier by the minute. I gnashed my teeth, trembling, then inhaled another puff.

I prayed it was still there.

My legs nearly buckled as I stepped out of the car.

My cigarette slid through my fingers, and, in a flash of panic, I picked it up and doused it in my pocket. Not that picking up my own litter would be of much help now—my stomach was already boiling, with some hefty tumorous mass seething and roiling around down there. I tried to calm it with my palm; it only squirmed harder against my touch.

I forgot all about it when I realized this slum's sidewalk looked so much cleaner than I remembered.

There were no bottles lying around, shattered or otherwise, common fixtures in these sad spots. No loosely tied plastic bags overflowing with trash. I didn't see any cigarette butts or discarded posters; even the graffiti on the walls looked like it was beginning to fade.

In the back of my mind, I fet a tinge of bitterness. This phenomenon may actually be doing some good after all.

I bit my lips and shook the thought off, wincing as I walked on. The discomfort was spreading fast. I burrowed my fingernails into my stomach, then raked them across my chest up to my neck. My skin ripped in tiny welts in nearly every part I touched.

My body ached all over, yet it all paled compared to the terror bloating inside me.

As I limped past one shanty of screaming babies to another shack full of barking dogs, I couldn't help but crack a smile.

What if one of these losers actually took Rindi?

Surely that would mean I never threw her away, right? I just gave the little devil up for adoption, and some gold-hearted fool here decided to bring her home! Someone a lot more tolerant, more patient, and who wouldn't mind her chewing on their shoes and sandals the way she kept ruining mine.

Hope glowed in a corner of my mind.

And the world seemed to agree; for the first time in days, my gut seemed to be clearing up. I felt relief wash over me. I reached into my pocket for a cigarette.

My stomach erupted. Blood rushed to my mouth. My knees caved under me, and I hurried toward the nearest wall for support. It reminded me of the ones in my home Rindi stained with piss.

Another flood swamped my tonsils. I collapsed to all fours, overwhelmed, and waves and waves of bile cascaded out of my mouth.

My stomach crumpled and constricted; it was like my insides were being pulled out.

"What do you think she littered?"

I looked up with a grimace; a crowd had already gathered to witness my anguish.

"If she throws up coins, would you pick them up?"

I raised my right hand, desperate for their help, while my left grasped at the mass creeping up my throat. I was offered their laughter in response.

"You really think a bitch like that ever gave alms?"

My esophagus tore open like a wound, squelching, splitting my jaws and exposing my deepest shame.

"What the hell?"

The mob around me backed off, their mockery turned to horror. They cursed me as if I was the first person to spew madness.

"You're disgusting!"

Their voices dampened under my unrelenting gags. I coughed out more and more black hair. Tears ran down my cheeks. My throat wrenched with hate, and through the thickets of fur clogging it, a whiskery muzzle pushed out.

"You sick fuck!"

My mouth continued to discharge my regret. Two bulging round eyes, prickly ears, and a stretched out paw punctured my cheeks.

My face hit the sidewalk, almost numb with pain. I lay face-down, paralyzed, moaning and blowing bubbles into the puddle of my own gruesome vomit.

My neck spasmed and ripped apart by the force of the bony torso inching its way to freedom.

The world had turned too slimy. Too blurry.

Still, I could recognize the furry little monster crawling out through my jaws, its mangled face now shredded and dissolved in my stomach acids. **It turned towards me as my vision faded, whimpering, and puked up the remains of my favorite sandal onto my face.**

CONVERSATIONS WITH MY BROTHER

1/5/2026, 2 P.M.—**I'm standing outside** a dilapidated home on East Stella Street in the infamous Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia. Walk north and you'll find yourself opposite an elementary school, minutes from the final bell, its students soon to flood the conjoining streets of Jasper and East Elkhart. Walk another two blocks north and you'll arrive at the neighborhood's namesake (and the city's shame)— Kensington Avenue, the open-air drug market where my brother was a well-known player before his transformation into a column of moribund flesh.

My brother's side of East Stella street is lined with tightly-packed rowhouses, alternating between shabby facades of exposed-brick and worn stucco. There's a sense of danger on these narrow avenues - a hostility in every glance as the neighbors have learned to protect the familiar and track the interlopers, the ever-present wailing of sirens foregrounding the cacophony of city noise, and the low rumbling of the 295 overpass underscoring the cries of life desecrated by the urban desert. My already-on-guard nerves fray quickly in the half-hour period it typically takes for one of his "tenders" to answer the tinny buzz of the barely-functioning bell. His cohort includes the knotty, tatted, dreadlocked Sha, a permanent fixture my brother met online two years ago (and could be considered his partner), the younger men Sha often gives refuge to in return for favors I don't ask about (last time, it was a cagey, bespectacled Eastern European living off an expired student Visa named Miko), and, occasionally, Lolli, the only dealer still willing to supply the house. My wait today is shorter than usual; after only a few minutes, Sha unlocks the door and motions me inside.

From what I've gathered, Sha is a Kensington lifer. Born to a conservative mixed Irish and Puerto Rican family, Sha stayed here in the 90s when the rest of his clan left for the suburbs. A gay kid who loved the rave scene, he dealt ecstasy and cocaine and "never got the virus" (a phrase he's unable to speak without an accompanying sign-of-the-cross) in spite of having put himself at-risk in countless scenarios. As hinted by the fading crucifix inked into his left cheek, Sha is a true believer, and my brother's condition has served only to bolster his faith. I'd be more skeptical of the man if he didn't meet my brother after his transformation began - unlike the others in his orbit, it's hard to blame him for enabling Andres' decline. Sha is what he claims to be: my "brother's keeper", and I'm grateful that their lonely souls have found some measure of peace alongside each other.

Last week, he called to tell me that Andres had stopped eating entirely and feared his time would soon be at an end. He wanted to spend his remaining days with family, and as our parents have both written him off as dead, I feel it appropriate to take my place by his side.

We both had conditions. I was allowed my little Tascam to record our conversations, but no video would be taken. Since fully congealing in April, he's refused to let anyone capture his image, and it's not hard to blame him. Andres is fully aware of what his body has become - it'd be impossible not to feel - but still refuses to look at himself. The transformation took me months to process myself - the carefree boy I can visualize turning over logs and digging for worms stretched into a column that joins a decrepit bergere to a ceiling rippled with impossible shades of mold.

He's kept shrouded in the third story apartment facing the street by windows coated in alternating layers of black paint and

newsprint. In the blind dark, the stench becomes its own entity, a chimera of chemical smoke, curdled dairy, and what could be an entire constellation of little florid trees hanging from the ceiling, failing to do more than add depth to the must and rot. Offering a measure of sensory reprieve, a small Sony consumer-brand CD player loops CD-Rs of drum-and-bass music or, more frequently, a disc of rainforest sounds by Robert Rich. It's the only token of our shared childhood that he possesses—late nights camping in the living room in blanket forts, playing the rainforest sounds over mom's stereo, imagining panthers and parrots just yards from where we sat huddled. Sha guides me up the narrow, creaking stairway.

"**Lulu. You came.**" His voice is deep, raspy, nothing like I remember it. Andres was bullied for his lisp and high-pitched voice that never quite descended in pubescence. I used to be able to picture the shape of that awkward, gangly kid in the darkness before his vocal chords extended. The white-noise effect of the rainforest tape masks the more unpleasant aural aspects of his form. We sit in the squalid dark for some time. I become acclimated to the odor. The walls of the room evaporate, and the sound of flowing rivers and chittering birds give me the sense of a curious interloper, petitioning the jungle's oldest mangrove for its timeless wisdom.

When he breaks his silence, the words are labored, downtempo of any typical conversation, a rhythm I'm now accustomed to. "Let's not make it too long. I'm sure you're hungry."

"Sha tells me you haven't been eating."

"Are you recording?" I have been. "Turn down the tape if you'd like."

"It's fine." A macaw calls for its mate. I become conscious of my index finger digging into my thumb's nailbed. "Andres, what do you think is happening to you?"

"I'm pressed up enough against the drywall to crack it. I might fill that space."

"Can you be more descriptive?"

"I thought that was your job. But you won't see me." This was his directive, not mine, and although I'd previously seen enough to prepare myself, I respect his wishes. I get a sense of comfort knowing he still feels a measure of shame. "I can't tell you exactly what's happening to me. You can find out after." We've settled the matter of bringing any kind of professional in - not until he's gone. I couldn't imagine how painful it'd be to move him.

I suck the edge of my thumb and taste copper. I haven't picked like this in years, not since I started reporting. I become aware of the recorder, and my purpose here. "Can you tell us how this started?"

"Us?" An incessant trilling rises over the rest of the birdcalls. Some sounds like thunder, and light rain. A minute or so into the downpour, he continues: "That's a complicated question. What is 'this'? How I am now? How I got in this apartment? How I started using? Why I started using?"

"Start wherever you'd like."

Sha erupts in a deep, booming laugh that reminds me of Vincent Price at the end of "Thriller," very much tickled by the irony of having first seen Andres as a close-cropped, erect penis. They met on a hookup app for men in the lifestyle who like to PNP—party and play, "do drugs and prolly fuck."

He's showing me how to make a meth pipe out of a 60-watt bulb: with an awl (but "a knife is fine for this shit"), he cracks the plastic center of the cap so he can remove the fuse and filament. "Careful not to crack the shit," spoken low-voiced as he applies a speed freak's singular focus to the task. "Dres was always a princess about this shit, never wanted to do it hisself." The plastic now cracked, he was making short work gutting the insides. "But his arms was already fucked up then. You gotta - you see this white shit on the inside?"—the coating that gives the bulb its opaque frosting—"you gotta just gotta rinse that out in the sink. You don't wanna light this shit up, is prolly asbestos or some shit." (It's silica powder.)

Before I register he's left, Sha emerges from the kitchen with a piece of tin foil and a halved plastic straw poking out of the side of his mouth in the gap between his top-left canine and remaining mo-

lars. “He was like - I dunno, like I knew what he look like, he was real about it, up-front and shit, and I had this fucked-up looking cousin-,” he wraps the bit of foil around the hollow cap at the stem of the bulb, leaving a tubular length of foil. He raises the end to my eye so I can see through to his distorted, grinning face on the other side of the glass. “You pour the shit in through here.”

After he empties the crushed, crystalline contents of a small pink baggie into the bulb-cum-pipe, I ask him if he ever tests the drugs he gets. Click. His face turns somber as the blue flame of a butane torch melts the crystals into a clear liquid. “Shit, of course. You ain’t wanna die.” Ever the gentleman, Sha offers the again-opaque lightbulb to me for the first hit. I politely decline.

Sha coughs out a cloud. After several visits, I’ve begun to welcome the resulting smell - burnt-plastic and banned cleaning chemicals - as Sha always calms down after a few hits. (I’ve pondered the inverse effect of stimulants on individuals with ADHD and wonder what might’ve become of Sha if he was ever given a chance.)

His speech finds focus, words measured instead of spilled: “Like I was sayin’, I got a cousin who look like Beetlejuice [from the Howard Stern show], little fucked up looking guy, but even worse, like his arms was flippers or some shit. It was like everyone - my cousins, my brothers, even some of the adults - was scared of him, but me, I [wasn’t]. God made us all, right? And I always spent time with him, like at cookouts and shit, but even outside that, I’d go over, show him movies, talk with him, just chopping it up, right? Even his moms... like, she was always sad about him, didn’t even spend time with him, know what I’m saying?” His eyes soften, drift down. I ask for his name.

“Trevor. Big Trev I always say. I bet you I call my cousins now and they don’t even remember that shit.” It’s the smallest, most human Sha’s ever seemed to me. “Not like they’d answer me. But I’m a fuckup. Trev never had a chance.” I place my hand over his, the one grasping the butane lighter, and give him time. When his eyes move back up to mine, they sparkle back to life. “Also, like, Dres was funny, man. Not like all that, like really, really funny.” I know what he means—the riotous, spot-on jabs he’d take at the shitty mean girls who tortured me were the only times my disaffected teenage facade would break beyond a smile. “He can still be real funny sometimes. He’s a good dude, your brother."

It’s harder now to see that witty, fearless kid in his room upstairs. Lack of visible light aside, there’s an unfamiliar solemnity in his affect as he relates his story. I can’t help but picture him as this animatronic talking tree that sat rotting in a local South Jersey Chuck E. Cheese knockoff we frequented as latchkey kids.

“Remember when we used to play dress up? How bad did you want to keep the costume on?” I can only summon the visual of a faded kodiak of a tiny pink ballerina and a fuzzy cyan dinosaur. “I did all of the time.” I mentally add man to the end of the sentence in my head, one of his older vocal tics. I understand he doesn’t have many words left to waste. “I liked Halloween ‘cause we could, all night. It was the best for that. Not just ‘cause we didn’t have to deal with mom and dad bullshit. Not ‘cause I didn’t have to go two masses.” His voice dove deeper, accompanied by a persistent noise clicking as wooden or organic fascia compressed and contracted. “I always felt like that, Lu.”

“Even when we was in school together - you always made me feel big.” Hard not to now—there’s an enormity to his form that can be felt, if only by the resonance of his voice, but I remembered the pride I exuded as an acne-scarred 13-year-old, introducing what few friends I made to Andres, my big, gay brother, naive to his shame. “And then you went with mom—,” to Salem, Oregon, a world away—”And I didn’t do good.” He’s quiet for some time. I hear a slow rattling, and a bitter cold blows down my neck. “Or, I didn’t do well. But I didn’t do good stuff either.”

Three-thousand miles away, the impression I gathered from his social media was that his time at Gloucester County College was a non-stop party, and I was too young and self-absorbed to think otherwise. He never reached out, never called: I assumed must’ve been having a great time. “School was rough. I didn’t want to go to class and see other people look at me. I couldn’t look in the mirror.” I let a minute of silence pass before asking him why. “I would cry, every time. I didn’t want to be me. I felt like a fat ugly loser.” Andres was

a bit thick around the middle and had a butt that stuck out a bit. They'd call him fat faggot, and he always laughed it off, acted like it didn't bother him. "And then I met this guy Mike."

He'd go on to explain that Mike - Professor Morris - was his first introduction to the lifestyle, a not-lecherously-older adjunct who recognized something of himself in my brother. "We played around a bit and he got me high the first time. Just weed, but I was out of it. I saw this pyramid but it was a bell. It rang loud, and I could see it in waves. Past them was a pillar, like at a museum with art on it, but it was me on there." I had closed-eye visuals the first time I got that stoned - Oregonians don't pull punches for newbies - but nothing quite along the lines of my perfected form on a pedestal. "I looked like a god. Almost felt like one. And when it was over, I just wanted more."

Making my way back downstairs, the creaking of the almost-always vacant rattan rocking chairs announce a pair of new arrivals to the household. The first—an emaciated ragdoll of a man in layers of soiled, Salvation Army-sourced quilted coats—slumps forward in the rocker closest to the stairs, half-awake. The second—far more animated and squirrely, Peter Lorre peeking through time to play a destitute Vietnam vet—rocks in double-time with his speech as he carries on conversation with Sha that stops the moment I enter their cone of awareness. Sha introduces me to Gary (the nodding one) and Jeep (he sleeps in one), the latter of whom regards me with fair skepticism. Unexpectedly, he relaxes when he finds out I'm (technically) press, and launches into a dizzying polemic against the Philadelphia Department of Sanitation, daring me to expose the greed, the corruption, and the filth hollowing out his great neighborhood. Time expands and contracts, and the limbo of Jeep's diatribe persists ad infinitum until Gary asks to see Dres.

I clock Sha's hesitance as he considers Gary's request. After the better part of a day spent 'chopping it up' with Sha, I've discovered a genuine care and warmth within his character, the heart of a true caretaker who could've made a fine nurse or mental health technician. In relation to Andres, Gary takes on the more disturbing form of an acolyte, mumbling of my brother in a hushed, reverent stupor: "You believe it? You better, you see it, hear him crack drywall, go through the cracks, in the walls, in the basement, cement cracks, sprouting up the sidewalk." Like many of the men in my brother's orbit, I couldn't tell his age. (The most accurate accounting once could give is "not too far from the end.") His sunken eyes vacuum in his surroundings, sucking everything and everyone into depths of dread and sadness. I am not spared when they meet my gaze, and I'm taken aback by the realization: this is how I thought reconnecting with Andres would feel.

Instead, the more time I spend in his presence, the more at peace I become. Perhaps it was the effect of the darkness and the field recordings, but it was palpable in his aspect, some radiant serenity. It reminded me of long-ago tales of tuberculosis victims lighting up a room prior to their demise. I could understand why the hopeless and the strung out were led to him. I could see him as a candle burning in the underbelly, drawing Garys from destruction.

I think I understand. I am sure of it. I draft a narrative of hope in my mind, oblivious to the rising tension as both Gary's requests and Sha's denials grow teeth. Eventually, Sha relents. Gary spends twenty minutes upstairs and returns with a blissed-out look, lips stained a dull green. He stops for a moment in front of Sha and clasps both arms around him in what seems like an embrace of surrender.

I avoid asking about Gary during my last conversation with Andres. I'm focused on filling in the gaps between Professor Morris and the last time I saw him in person, at our cousin Lordes' wedding, when he was unceremoniously disowned by the entire extended family.

"Lu, I seen that guy on the down low." For any readers unfamiliar with the lifestyle: straight-presenting men who engage in affairs with other men will refer to themselves as 'on the down low/DL' when soliciting hookups. "Dude didn't play safe either. You think he getting tested?"

I won't question my brother's intentions directly, but Lordes was always an outspoken conservative Catholic who embodied many

of the regressive social attitudes towards gender and sexuality still prevalent in the Cuban American immigrant population. The scene he made during the toasts wasn't exactly an act of care and concern.

Over the next hour, Andres unwinds the story in an elliptical, drifting fashion that suggests our time today is coming to a close. I've done my best to organize it into a coherent timeline (and verify facts with what sources I could track down):

> First semester at Gloucester County College: he meets Mike. Starts experimenting with weed and going to clubs. Gets introduced to ecstasy. Barely passes most of his classes, fails one. (Biology.)
>
> Second semester: does ecstasy. Smokes. Drinks. Clubs. Has his first run-in with the law for public intoxication and indecency. Claims he got off with a warning because the guy he was hooking up with recognized the cop. Does not attend classes after the second week. Fails all and does not re-enroll.
>
> The following summer: our father's mother passes; I spend a week in Jersey for the velorios. I don't see Andres while I'm there. We both receive a small sum of around ten thousand dollars from her life insurance. Andres uses it as capital to start dealing weed, ecstasy, GHB, and pills at GCC and South Jersey raves.
>
> The next two years are much the same. Using, selling, partying, random hookups. He picks up a coke habit, and most of his high school weight melts away. He claims this period is the happiest he's ever been, the most comfortable he's ever been in his own skin, and I purposefully avoid a follow-up to relate it to his current condition.
>
> With only a few days remaining until he could legally drink, the party comes to an end. A cop pulls him over, smells an evening's worth of spiced rum, arrests and charges him with a DUI. (Thankfully, he is not thoroughly searched, so he's able to flush the few grams of coke tied to his balls.) Dad bails him out, but ensures any money left over from my grandmother's estate will be used to pay back the bail money and any court/lawyer fees. He offers Andres an ultimatum: rehab or homelessness. The day he goes into rehab, I text him happy birthday and ask him if he's going to Lordes' wedding. He doesn't respond until I'm in town a few weeks later, and asks me to pick him up for breakfast.
>
> I am surprised at how skinny he looks, but I naively understand his drug-induced hypomania as the same genuine joy I feel for reconnecting with my *mano*. We find our old booth vacant at the diner and spend hours catching up. I do most of the yapping—how different Oregon was from Jersey, how obnoxious the other journalism majors were, how I might be bisexual now, how bad Stacy Diebert's lip filler looks in her profile photo)—and it's so much like old times that I don't question what few details he gives about his life. He's doing well, and excited to start his Bachelors in photography at Mason Gross.
>
> He misses the ceremony. Lordes and Alex's combined families are big enough to hand-wave the difference. If concern is written across our father's face, it's in a language I can't read. He is a man who speaks his will, not his feelings. His complexion reddens when Andres arrives for the reception, bloodshot eyes accentuated by an ill-fitting, baby-pink tuxedo, and offers a vulgar, vicious toast to the newlyweds. It takes four groomsmen to contain him and drag him towards the exit; his calls of "*Que vivan los recién casados! La princesa y el puto!*" diffuse amid the chatter of the guests. The DJ gets the hint and plays "*Oye Como Va*" to dampen Lordes' howling sobs.

Sha deadbolts the door. Both Jeep and Gary are gone now. The old rowhouse creaks as the temperature drops and shrinks its wooden bones. The radiator clanks and hisses. I'm reminded I haven't eaten since late morning.

It's impossible for me not to ask about what just happened with Gary. Sha's initial reluctance to explain evaporates with the

shards of crystal at the bottom of his now-blacked lightbulb, and he relates the story of when Gary first met Andres.

As in any social circle, the users crowding the streets and traps of Kensington talk. Word of my brother's transformation grew legs, creeping through the community, appropriately changing form. Whispers of a guy "fucked up by bad shit" stretched into a tall tale about the guy who finally did it, accomplished living a life where nothing more was required than a daily intake of drugs. No need to eat, no need to move. The fucked-up, filthy struggle for survival reduced to a simple, Zen-like state of being, a twist in the tale of Siddhartha where a meditating Gotama sprouts into a tree upon enlightenment. Gary had "never believed in nothing," and unsurprisingly, many of the fent, tranq, and dope heads lining the open-air drug market of Kensington Ave opted out of both society and God, a package deal.

Skeptical of the rumors (and two days into a speed binge), Gary marched down East Stella, knocked on the door, and demanded he see Andres at once. Whoever was hanging out there - according to Sha, a revolving door of dealers, drug fiends, and down-low men looking to hookup - let him in, led him upstairs, and invited him to enter Dres' stygian, stinking den. Whatever instincts told me, step-by-step, to turn the other way as I ascended and entered misfired in Gary, and he thrust himself inside, uninitiated.

Disoriented by the squawking macaws and pitch dark, he pulled out his torch to get a view. In the soft-blue butane glow, he saw a shifting, fleshy column pocked with two sad, glassy eyes, peered back through darkened slits over a gaping, black maw. Triggered into a fight response, Gary pulled out his 'protection' - a stiletto switchblade - and plunged it into Andres' side, screaming like the capuchins on the stereo.

He burst out and nearly fell down the stairs, gibbering and howling. Sha found him passed out behind the boiler in the basement, reeking of the shit filling his trousers, his meth-fueled investigation ended by a hasty injection of gray market Chinese benzodiazepines. (Gary would later swear off speed completely and stick strictly to whatever substance is currently zombifying him.)

After getting the story from some of the downstairs crowd, Sha trekked upstairs to check on Andres. With permission, he flicked on the light to inspect for damage. It was hard not to notice the form of a switchblade sticking out of my brother's side. On closer inspection, it was harder to recognize the knife itself, as the blade and handle were enveloped by small, foamy-looking tendrils excreting a pleasant-smelling, cloudy-green ichor that dripped down in a viscous line into a puddle on the floor.

In the timeline I provided earlier, I left out what happened in the three weeks between his stint in rehab and the wedding. To be honest, I'm still having a hard time processing it.

Andres' time at Overlook was brief. They diagnosed him with bipolar disorder and put him on medication. "I just felt depressed. I thought I liked to have a good time and I was in there with people with real problems." His days were spent shuffling from support group to support group, listening to outpourings of misery and regret that made him feel better about his own situation. His roommate kept him up at night with the crinkling of sugar packets. (The dopeheads in there would pocket them to help with withdrawals and choke down the contents at all hours of the morning.) Six days passed, and he was released with no outpatient plan and no desire to continue the regiment.

Dad's presence was almost incidental. "He signed the forms. Took me home. Didn't say a word." He relapsed in 24 hours and, to pre-empt the inevitable, decided to move out. "I remembered this guy on craigslist I met. Parris. Two 'r's. He was cool, good looking, but I only saw him once 'cause he liked to party." Party and play. Parris was into meth and sex; he filmed it to help pay the rent. "I didn't think I was good enough to be in it, but he had a kid living there he threatened to shoot [porn with] if he didn't pay the rent. That stuck with me. I could pay the rent."

Parris was interested in a more holistic solution: why not both?

The issue for Andres was that Parris was poz (slang for HIV positive) and bareback videos made better money. My brother wouldn't consider it. "No PREP back then." Parris was hesitant, but

agreed to a clean arrangement as long as Dres was as he said. They both went to a clinic to get tested.

"The nurse ask to talk to me alone. P gave me this look. I thought my life was over, right there and then."

We sit in silence for some time. The rainforest CD loops around to the start.

On my way out, I thank Sha for his time and everything he's done for my brother, and am kindly rebuffed: "It's no thing. He's my guy." Even deep in the trenches of harrowing depravity, tragedy, and strangeness, there's light to be found: the boy who was so terrified of accepting who he was, how he looked, and everything he thought he could never be finally found someone who accepts and loves him wholeheartedly. Maybe someone like Sha could've prevented this if they'd met each other sooner.

The deadbolt locks. Everything hits at once. The knot in my stomach pulsates. My throat tightens. I shoot bile across the broken pavement.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about it. I can see it in my head so clearly now. Gary, coming downstairs with his lips stained green. Gary, laid on the floor, mouth wide open. Thick greenish sap drizzling down from his old switchblade, assimilated into my brother's form.

He was drinking it.

A DAY, ● A LACK

The scalp is a bramble of nerves, but there isn't much flesh to get through. No muscle between skin and skull. That's why it won't hurt like you think it might. But you'll have to stay alert for the moment when bony resistance gives way to negative space.

Gore will drip into your eyes. You laid down sheets of plastic to catch the debris.

You carefully chose the drill bit from the instructions on the GeoCities site, hard to find in today's internet of purchases. But you know how to locate the arcane links from when the web was a secret library of very old desires.

You remembered seeing it late one night in the middle of a speed binge: pictures and instructions for making the hole. You sometimes thought you hallucinated it, but you didn't see things on speed, not unless you'd been up for three days straight.

You looked it up at work one day to be sure. As soon as the page loaded, you flicked the monitor off so no one else could see it. Cold sweat dripped into your eyes. Apprehension and excitement roiled your guts.

It won't feel like you should go farther. But you should. You're almost there.

You tried to push down the fluttering thrill from that last image of bliss, the nameless man on the plastic-covered table with his eyes closed in ecstasy, his finger nearly inside his exposed brainpan, plasma gelling down his bushy eyebrows. That black and crisp hole ringed with tiny white bone shards, begging to be fondled and explored.

Every other hole disappointed. After a while, you gave up. You dreamed of having just that hole and its emptiness all for yourself. Soon, you will. The thought silvers you like speed in your veins.

You have a couple days off for Thanksgiving. You don't have to request time. If all goes well, you'll be back on Monday with a bandage. Your landlord is out of town. So are the neighbors down the corridor; no one to ask if you're putting up a new cabinet or wrecking the drywall.

You taper off eating for two days. You get some calories from green juice and miso, enough to keep your aim true. You are light, emptied, readied for a new day.

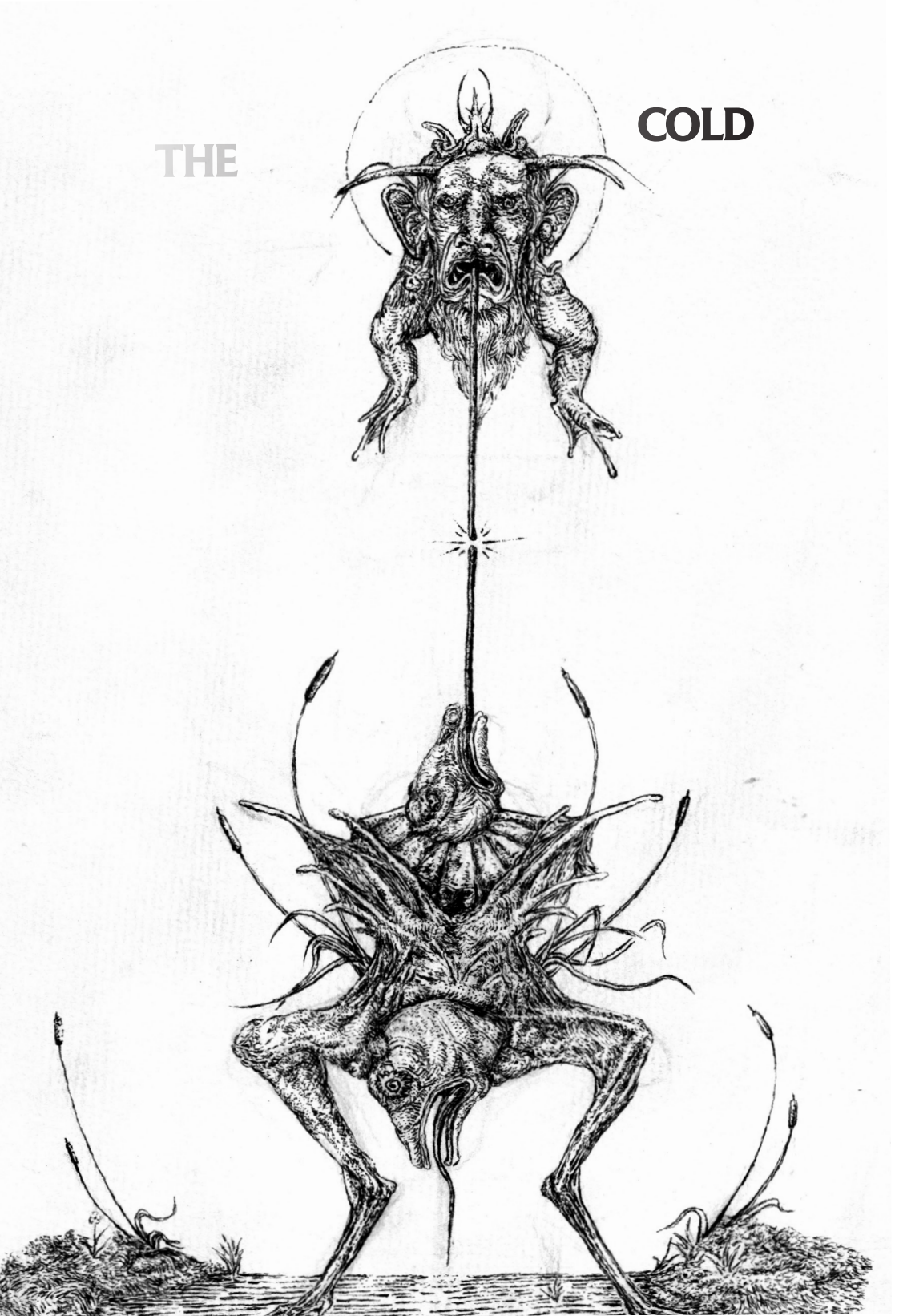
You imagine the drill is like a gun to the head. Cold and smooth. The promise of a wound that never closes.

The drill sends your ears ringing, but from the inside. Pain flash replaced with stardust. Asteroids colliding across your eyeballs. Bone splinters. Something gives way. This is what others sense when they touch.

Your face feels wet and wrinkled like a newborn's. You are gasping like you have never breathed before. The air smells different: metal scrapings, ginseng. You lift your finger to your head like in the picture.

It is a lush and round lack. It is nothing. You lie back on the plastic. You succumb

to pleasure.



MOON CROWN

The glistening snow on the narrow road forced Nicholas to drive slowly. He'd been dreaming of the place since the previous year; almost every night since he found out about the Conjunction. Only one of those dreams involved his car sliding off the road to be swallowed up by the murky waters of the moor, and he was confident he could put that one down to eating cheese at an unwise hour. Still, he took his time.

The old house was a bit worn about the edges, but only just shabby enough to give it some character. There was some dead ivy around the gables, and the restoration effort a few generations past had left the placement of the windows looking asymmetrical, as though the building had a squint in some of its many eyes. The snow did a lot to make it seem cosier than it might have otherwise looked.

Blake was there to meet him as he found a place to park. It looked like he was the last to arrive.

"How was the journey up?"

"Oh, you know. Most of it was just getting out of the city." Nicholas glanced over at the rust-spotted camper van squatting between the Porches and BMWs. "Let me guess: Sandra brought a guest."

Blake smirked. "Wait 'til you meet him; he's a hoot."

"How are Marie and the kids?"

"Oh, they're great. They're dying to see you." Blake paused and winced. "Look, I know you're not looking forward to answering questions about it all week, but how'd it go with Ruby?"

"It's okay. I mean, it went about as well as could be expected."

There was a servant waiting just inside to take Nicholas' coat; Nicholas didn't recognise him, and for a moment felt a pang of nostalgia and melancholy when he thought that there would be plenty of familiar faces missing this year. It was a shame that they only bothered with proper family gatherings during Conjunction years.

There had been times in the house's past when it had lain almost empty, with some unlucky caretaker rattling around the twisting corridors all alone. Thank goodness there was a bit of life about the place these days. The gothic arches of the halls were decked with boughs of holly, sprigs of mistletoe, candy canes and fake pine needles. There was warmth in the air, and not just from the roaring fireplaces.

It was sometimes easy to lose sight of what he loved about this place, especially given the sacrifices it demanded. All of it came rushing back with the handshakes and hugs from relatives he hadn't seen in years. It was heartening, too, to see that some of the kids were still enthralled by the likes of teddies, dollies and fire-trucks. Nicholas had almost foregone presents altogether and just bought them all subscriptions to a streaming service, but he'd played it safe and bought a heap of board games at the last minute.

Here and there, the children's crayon drawings of the Redhead were affixed to walls and doors where they wouldn't damage the paint or varnish. Most of the drawings depicted him with horns and a third eye, though he seldom appeared with those attributes in any eyewitness accounts. In each drawing, he was holding a glass of milk.

Nicholas found his parents in the library. His father glowered at him as they shook hands.

"Cutting it a bit fine."

"I'm here. That's all that matters."

"What if you got into an accident?"

"I didn't."

"It has to be tonight, you know."

Nicholas narrowed his eyes. "I know that better than you."

"You look like you're dressed for a funeral," his mother commented, defusing the growing argument with a criticism of her own. "As usual."

Nicholas frowned and pointed to his tie. "C'mon, this has snowmen on it."

"Put on one of your father's Christmas jumpers when you get a chance. Helen's little girl was just asking if you're the lawyer who made her daddy go away."

Nicholas took that as his excuse to break away from them and mingle, feigning interest in talk of business and politics—the Paris Agreement, an AI startup in San Francisco, the latest withdrawal from the Republican nomination race. Some of the kids had grown up in the years since Nicholas had seen them, and there were a handful of spouses that he'd never met in person before. Even among all the not-quite-familiar faces, though, the driver of the camper van was easy to spot: haphazardly shaven, with a mop of uncombed, dead-looking hair, wearing sandals with a threadbare suit about half a size too small for him. Sandra was setting out to stir trouble.

The guest had a Californian accent, and Nicholas' cousin Edgar had just asked him about his shit-box van, to make polite conversation.

"That's the beauty of a camper van: people are always upgrading, so there's always plenty going cheap. I picked up the one outside for a song, about a mile from the airport after we landed."

"Literally," Sandra added.

Killian shrugged and smiled. "The guy just wanted to get rid of it, I think. I kind of have a knack for finding people with stuff they want to give away."

Edgar saw Nicholas approach, and lunged at him to shake his hand. "Hey Nick, how are you?"

"I'm good, Ed. How are you holding up?"

"Well, these occasions are always..."

Nicholas gave him a smile that he hoped came across as reassuring rather than grim. Edgar's and Nicholas' fathers were brothers; Ed's dad was the eldest of their generation when their turn came. "It's very good of you to come."

Ed put his hand on Nicholas' shoulder. "I wouldn't have stayed away." He took a deep breath, assumed a cheerier demeanour, and continued, "Anyway, I'm going to corner your father, and twist his arm for some of that Napoleon brandy I hear he has squirreled away somewhere. À bientôt."

Nicholas noted the speed of his cousin's departure, and steeled himself for the formal introduction to Sandra's latest waste of time.

Killian had a good grip, and as Nicholas shook hands with him, he felt a sinewy strength in his arm.

Killian chuckled. "It's wild: you guys really all look alike."

"Our mother thinks it's hereditary iron deficiency. Anyway, it's very nice to meet you, Killian. I hope you've been made to feel welcome."

"He prefers to sleep in the van," Sandra said, "but I insisted he spend a night or two in a proper bed, for once. From the upstairs windows, he'll be able to properly see the moonlight on the snow."

Killian's eyes lit up. "That's right! Dude, did you know there's a full moon tonight? A full moon on Christmas; ain't that something?"

"Really? I had no idea." Nicholas shot his sister a glance when Killian looked away for a moment.

She met his glare with a mischievous wink. "Pretty cool, huh?" She turned to Killian. "Is there any significance to that, babe?" She turned back to Nicholas. "Killian's into all kinds of spiritual stuff."

"Well, a full moon is the ideal time to do spirit work, and Christmas, if you go back to pre-Christian times..."

Nicholas tuned out Killian's improvised new-age blather and focused on how big and punchable his face was. He could feel his neck growing hot, though, and there was a pounding behind his right eye, a recurring migraine that came on with stress and anger. What the fuck is she playing at?

"...as long as you have the proper Simhasana technique," Killian finished, taking a sip of his drink.

"Simhasana," Nicholas murmured. "Wow. Well, I can't say I know it, but I'll bear it in mind."

Sandra's expression soured. "Ah, here comes Aunt Bernice. I'm nowhere near drunk enough for that yet, so I'll see you boys later."

It was too late to escape. Aunt Bernice was upon them, and all Nicholas could do was stare daggers after his retreating sister. Bernice had never been overburdened with discretion, and she didn't bother with any small-talk or preamble.

"I was sorry to hear about Ruby," she said, loudly. "She was so lovely."

Nicholas sighed. "Thanks, Bernice."

Killian gasped. "Aw, dude! I'm so sorry for your loss." He extended a hand to shake.

Nicholas winced. "Thanks, Killian. Ruby isn't dead; we just broke up."

Killian's face cycled through relief and amusement for a second before he realised that this was still bad news, and settled on a solemn expression. Nicholas didn't see any embarrassment in the mix, and he envied Killian for that.

"Of course," Aunt Bernice said, "the important thing isn't to pin the blame on either side. So many young people's relationships fall apart these days. It's a wonder anyone lasts until marriage at all."

"Yeah," Nicholas said. "Life seems to get in the way."

"Say what you like about the old ways," Bernice went on, "but you didn't have to watch what you said around the other person, because they were already in the know."

Killian looked baffled. "Old ways?"

Bernice shrugged. "Of course, it makes for a happier marriage in the long run when youngsters are free to marry whoever they wish, but..."

Nicholas jumped in before Killian could process that, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Did Sandra give you the grand tour yet?"

Reeling from conversational whiplash, Killian blinked and stammered, "Uh, no."

"C'mon, then," Nicholas said, steering him away from Bernice. "I'll show you around."

Nicholas picked a delicate path through the intricate passages of the house, avoiding anyone who might blurt something out. The problem was that because Killian was here, many of them might assume that he had already been inducted into the family's traditions.

There was no avoiding the fresco of the Mortlake family tree, though, which dominated the wall above the grand staircase. All the strands and branches of the dynasty were present up to 1983, when the wall finally ran out of room.

Killian chortled. "Far out, man—you three are the last ones!"

He was pointing to the cramped scrolls painted on just above the landing, bearing the names of Nicholas, Blake and Sandra. Nicholas' name was underlined in red. On the next line up, there was another underlined name.

"Who's Josiah?"

"Our uncle. He died before any of us were born. Actually..." Nicholas checked his watch. "Yeah, I should visit his grave before dinner gets going."

Anyone else would have taken that as a hint, but Killian merely said, "Right on," and followed Nicholas out of the house.

Down the garden path and into the jasmine grove they went, with the snow starting to fall again. Here was where the children had left out bottles of milk for the Redhead earlier that evening.

"So, Nick... what's the family's bread and butter? I mean, it doesn't make any difference to me. But you aren't, like, arms dealers or anything, are you?"

There had been one idiot second cousin whose armaments enterprise had served as a useful example of why it was best to stick to less attention-grabbing lines of business.

Nicholas laughed. "No. It's all abstract nowadays. Stocks, shares, investments; no tangible products at all."

"Ah," Killian said, grinning. "Idle rich. Far out, man. Nice work if you can get it."

Nicholas counted to ten in his head as they passed through the arch into the cemetery, lest he say or do something unwise.

The sight of the cemetery always gave Nicholas pause for thought. It was as large and voluminous as a town graveyard, and many of the headstones were eroded, cracked and tilting with age and subsidence. It was strange to think of how many Mortlakes had died in the ancestral home, out here on this island in the middle of a moor. He'd once half-entertained a notion that these graves preceded the house, rather than the other way around. It would be in keeping with family tradition if his ancestors had settled here to be close to the dead.

The sight of a mortsafe cage made him chuckle. He couldn't imagine a grave-robber foolish or determined enough to raid this place.

Sandra was at Josiah's grave ahead of them. She turned as she heard them approach, walked up to Killian and pulled him to her.

Nicholas averted his eyes and contemplated the date of death on Josiah's headstone: December 25, 1977. He found himself staring at it for quite a while; the kiss was a bit much, even for Sandra. When she finally pulled away and Killian was able to catch a breath, he looked like he was emerging from a coma.

"Darling, would you give us a moment? We need to discuss some family business. Head inside; I'll join you in a few minutes."

Killian nodded and sauntered back to the house, hands in his pockets.

Nicholas waited until he was out of earshot and asked, "What surf shop did you get him from?"

"Not a surf shop. A weed farm up in the mountains."

"Which mountains?"

"Haha, that'd be telling."

"What's the play here? 'Give me what I want and I'll make him go away'?"

"It's not as straightforward as that."

"But you do want something." Nicholas rubbed his temple, paused and took a breath. "Out with it, then. What are you angling for?"

"Uncle Josiah's old townhouse in Marylebone," Sandra said. "There are other things, but they can wait for now."

Nicholas chuckled. "Much as I want Killian gone, he's not worth picking a fight with Edgar and Blake over Uncle Joe's place. How about... I dunno, a new car? Unless you've developed a taste for camper vans."

"He has hidden worth. You'll change your mind when you see it."

They fell silent when they heard the dinner bell ring out from the back door. The whole world seemed to fall silent. Nicholas felt weak in the knees for a moment. He felt like he'd been summoned to

the executioner's block.

"That's your cue," Sandra said, without any mischief or malice. "Good luck."

Nicholas felt guilty for losing his appetite. Knowing what was ahead, he just couldn't bring himself to tuck into the turkey, ham, brussels sprouts, roast potatoes and sundry other delights that took him right back to childhood. Everything was perfect, and he couldn't shake the feeling that certain things had been prepared in certain ways for his benefit. Everyone was being so nice and understanding.

His father pushed a slice of Marie's famous pumpkin pie towards him, while the others were distracted. "You can't do it on an empty stomach," he whispered.

Nicholas nearly snapped and asked how he would know, but he bit it back. Lucas Mortlake had already lost his brother to this. It would be pointlessly cruel to remind him that he had been exempt from it himself, on account of being born second. He was trying to show support, in his own inexperienced way.

The appointed hour drew nigh, and the children were discreetly ushered away into the playroom, where a massive TV and a variety of consoles would command their attention. By the advent of the next Conjunction, they'd be old enough to know the full truth about the Redhead and the Conjunctions and the Renewal and Release: all the ominous capitalised words that underpinned the family's existence.

Nicholas took the opportunity to have a piss and drink a glass of water. When he resumed his seat, the mood had turned tense and subdued.

The lights were lowered, and the gathering fell silent. A line of masked servants entered in single file, as slow as a funeral procession. Each one carried a lit candle, except for the first, who held a carafe of what looked like brandy, and the last, who carried a little bell and a tiny hammer, both silver.

The last servant in line rang the little bell, as the first placed the carafe in front of Nicholas.

Sitting in the liqueur was a dark, lumpy shape, anchored to the neck of the carafe with a black ribbon. Nicholas breathed deep as he took it in, confronted at last by the reality of it.

The bell was run again. Those at the table unfolded the black hoods next to their napkins, and placed them over their heads. Killian had to be prompted and shown what to do. The servants extinguished their candles and filed out of the room one by one, and the final one to do so pulled the dining room door shut as they left. In the low light, Nicholas unwound the ribbon and fished the dim shape out of the carafe.

These things didn't have an agreed-upon name. Nicholas understood them as 'gnomes.' On his plate before him now, he had a gnome, a tiny person about the size of a sparrow, curled up on itself and juicy with the strange drink it had been soaking in for a full month. He untied the ribbon from its neck and held it up by the head, glancing around at the others. They sat there in expectant silence, unseeing.

He put the gnome into his mouth feet-first and started chewing. Its tiny bones splintered under the pressure, and lacerated the inside of his mouth in a hundred different places. He suppressed a yelp of pain, but couldn't stop his heavy breathing. Relief rippled through the gathering, those in the know now reassured by the sounds of his efforts. He tasted his own blood, mingled with the liqueur and the gnome's flesh, which tasted sour and had the texture of a mushroom. He kept chewing, at least until he was sure there were no bone fragments left long enough to get stuck in his throat, and he swallowed in portions, with great difficulty.

He felt faint when he had finished, and the room seemed darker than it had been a moment before. His head lolled and the room spun around.

And then he was alone, and cold, and all the windows and doors were open, letting in the moonlight and the frost. Shaking and unsteady, he stood up and shuffled outside, following the sound of a guitar.

He hadn't expected the other realm to be such a close likeness of the waking world. If it had been more like his training simulation, all smooth and heightened gothic, he might have felt less disoriented.

Then, a luminous form in the shape of a peacock stalked across his path, pale and gleaming. The moonlight shone through it and made wispy shadows of its bones; its long tail brushed along behind it, leaving no mark. Nicholas looked behind him, and saw that he wasn't leaving tracks in the snow either.

The hypothesis was disproved: additional weirdness didn't make this place seem less uncanny.

Something was approaching with heavy footsteps. It slobbered and grunted and snuffled, and it reeked of faeces, urine, blood and old sweat.

None of the old accounts had given this thing a name, either. Nicholas thought of it as 'the guardian' for convenience's sake.

It was taller and wider than a normal man, with bristle-coated flesh and a ridge of hair running from its head down to its buttocks. Sharp tasks jutted from its jaws. Its eyes glinted somewhere in the dark. Huge wet nostrils flared on the end of its snout.

Nicholas waited for the ideal moment, hunkered down behind a snow-capped shrub. He had to time it just right, and move quickly and quietly.

"Dude, that's fucked up!"

Nicholas jumped, and spun to face the one who had whispered. It was Killian.

"How are—" Nicholas paused as the guardian sniffed deep and grunted, and then resumed its patrol. When he spoke again, he whispered lower. "How are you here?"

"I had to see, man. After you passed out, I tried some of that brandy." Killian laughed. "Are we both in the same trip right now? This is wild!"

Killian could've been a figment of his imagination, conjured up by the gnome-meat to complicate the Renewal further. It didn't matter, in a way. Whether he was real or not, Nicholas wouldn't be able to get rid of him now.

On second thought...

"We need to split up if we're going to get around him," Nicholas said. "You run that way, and I'll go the other."

"What do I do if he chases me?"

"Just keep going; he'll give up," Nicholas lied.

"Where do we meet up after?"

"Just up ahead. Quickly, here's our window!"

He pushed Killian out of cover and sent him sprawling across the path. Killian yelped, jumped to his feet and ran. The guardian bellowed and chased after him, so heavy and slow that it looked like it was running underwater. Dreamlike. Inescapable.

Nicholas watched the monster disappear into the dark, and darted across the patrol line, running at full pelt through the ghostly facsimile of the garden until he reached the grove where the jasmine grew in summer.

The grove was alive with chirps and little rattling noises. Tiny figures flitted from branch to branch and sang with buzzing voices. After a few moments, they settled down and regarded him with glass-bead eyes, tin wings flexing like a butterfly's. Every step he took kicked aside an empty or broken milk-bottle.

And there were all the others who had eaten the gnome before him.

There were dozens of them arrayed in rows, like a choir. The ones standing at the back were indistinct, little more than blurry silhouettes. Nicholas supposed that was because those ones no longer had anyone alive to remember them. The ones closer to the front were present in much more detail, though showing signs of fraying around the edges.

They were all missing their eyes, and all bore expressions of discomfort and pain. Somehow, there was accusation in their empty-socketed expressions. One day, Nicholas would join them here.

Nicholas' uncle Josiah sat before them, plucking on his guitar. He looked to be in his early thirties, with shaggy hair and hippyish clothes. None of the Eldest died in their beds; Josiah was one of the unlucky ones who never woke up after going through the ritual.

"It's nice of you to visit," Josiah's ghost whispered. "To leave the comfort and warmth of the house, and grace us with your presence here behind the garden, where things go to be forgotten."

"If I could Release you, I would," Nicholas said. "But you know the rules."

"Yeah. First come, first served."

Nicholas turned from him and raised his voice. "Let the one who has waited the longest come forth."

The ghostly throng parted to allow one of the shapes from the back to shuffle forward. It was little more than a column of smoke with the vague suggestion of a human form within. Nicholas was almost afraid to breathe, in case he dispersed it further.

"What is your name?"

The spectre leaned in close to his right ear, and tried its best to enunciate. The effort sounded agonising, and Nicholas worried that he might have to ask it to repeat itself, but after a moment the sighs and whispers coalesced into recognisable words: Olga Fitzgerald.

Nicholas bowed. Before he withdrew from the company of the previous Eldest, he looked at his uncle once more. "I..."

Josiah's ghost stared at him blankly for another moment, and then resumed plucking his guitar.

The cemetery in this realm was the same as the other one. The same mortsafes were installed in the same places; the headstones were weathered and broken to the same degrees, and nothing seemed any neater or tidier. The otherworldly moonlight did lend a strange brightness to everything, though, making the names pop out at Nicholas as he passed them.

And then, there he was: the creature known euphemistically as 'the Redhead.'

Pale, with fiery hair and a narrow beard that curled up at the end like a scroll; dressed in a white suit, waistcoat and all; reeking like an extinguished match. He hovered about an inch above the ground, and he cast no shadow. In one six-fingered hand, he held a long, knobbed iron club, resting against his shoulder; with the other hand, he held a bottle of milk to his lips. Nicholas had to wait until the bottle had been drained and discarded before the Redhead addressed him.

"Another cold moon on Christmas night," the apparition said. His voice was deep and nasal. "Another Conjunction anoints another eldest child to renew the family's bargain. Who wears the crown this time?"

"Nicholas Mortlake stands before you, unafraid."

"Would you have me release any of those who renewed the compact before you?"

"Please release Olga Fitzgerald," Nicholas said.

The Redhead looked amused. "'Please'? A son of the Mortlakes asks politely?"

"My predecessors' journals were unclear on the etiquette," Nicholas explained, feeling sheepish.

The Redhead chuckled. "I suppose there's a first time for everything. Ah, yes—Olga. I remember her well. A lovely woman. I hope she enjoys her freedom." He waved his hand in the air. "There. It's done."

Nicholas braced himself. "Now let us renew the compact."

The Redhead smiled. "Indeed! And what a gift you've brought me! 'Saint Nicholas,' I should call you."

"Sorry, I don't understand."

The Redhead gestured over Nicholas' shoulder, and Nicholas heard footsteps approach from behind. He turned, and saw Killian staggering towards him, looking the worse for wear: he was out of breath, and it seemed the thorn bushes in this realm could cut and tear just as well as their counterparts in the other world.

"Can't you smell the bloodshed on him?" the Redhead asked. "The young aspiring actress; the young man on the mountain who thought he was a comrade; the doctor and her wife? No single method, procedure or signature—such variety! Can you see or hear any of them?"

Nicholas shook his head.

Killian looked at the pair of them for a moment, and then laughed. "Okay, okay. Look, I know this is a trip, and you guys are

just, like, figments or whatever, so you should already know about that stuff. C'mon, you know why all that happened."

The Redhead grinned. "You don't deny it?"

Killian scoffed. "Why deny it? I didn't do anything wrong." He sighed, as though exasperated. "Okay, fine. One more time. We are all just functions of the universe. Means to an end. Nothing we do is by our own free will, including the stuff I did."

The Redhead laughed. "He believes it!"

Killian turned to Nicholas. "Dude, c'mon, help me out here. You're me and I'm you. You know they were pre-ordained. Tell him!"

"This isn't just a trip, Killian," Nicholas said. "This is really happening. And you shouldn't be here."

Realisation dawned on Killian's face as the Redhead lifted the iron club. "N-no, wait, wait..."

His protests were cut short by the club's blow, which knocked him flat and caved in his head. He lay spasming on the snow, blood spurting from his mashed skull, but he didn't die. In this place, that might not have been possible.

"It's nice to be remembered on the holidays," the Redhead said, his tone wistful. "I know I'm not really part of the family, but to receive a gift... it raises the spirits. Thank you very much, dear boy. I think I'll make some changes to the compact as I Renew it this time."

Killian mouthed something and reached out towards Nicholas, his unburst eye wide with terror.

"Give my regards to the others when you see them," the Redhead continued, as Nicholas' vision started to blur and go dark. "Merry Christmas."

When Nicholas awoke, he was lying on his childhood bed, with his shoes, jacket and tie neatly set aside on a nearby chair. There was laughter coming from the parlour below. His father was doing his party-piece—"God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen," with added eye-rolling and eyebrow-waggling at certain lines. Outside, it looked like the gentle snowfall had turned into a frightful blizzard.

Sandra sat beside him, smoking.

"Well done," she said. "The pact is Renewed; the family prospers. It's out of sight, out of mind now."

Nicholas sat up. "Until the next Conjunction."

"That's not until 2034, you plonker. We can afford to relax and enjoy ourselves until then."

"The Redhead was very happy with Killian."

Sandra smirked. "Told you."

"Is anyone going to miss him?"

"No. His victims' families were never gonna get closure anyway. He had no consistent MO, and left nothing but burned-out camper vans; nobody was looking at him." She took a drag. "Anyway. The house in Marylebone."

Nicholas groaned. "I literally just woke up, sis."

"And Mortlake Interactive," Sandra added. "All of it."

Nicholas snapped his fingers. Sandra gave him a cigarette and lit it for him.

"Fine," he said. "MI isn't doing much for me, anyway, so you can give it a go if you like. The house will take a bit more finessing. What'll you even do with the place if Brexit goes ahead?"

Sandra patted his free hand and chuckled. "Yeah, right. Anyway, now that it's all over, d'you think you're gonna call Ruby?"

Nicholas shook his head. "That ship has sailed, I'm afraid."

Sandra nodded, reached under the bed, and handed him a gift-wrapped bundle. "Here. Put this on before you come down, or Mum will kill you." She stood up, opened the window and threw the end of her cigarette out onto the snow-covered roof, before turning to leave. "Merry Christmas," she said as she departed.

Nicholas tore open the wrapping paper and groaned when he saw the novelty jumper within, with its garish appliquéd Santa Claus and letters reading 'JOLLY OLD NICK.'

Santa's eyes were red, and a pair of stubby horns protruded from under his cap.

"Merry Christmas," he muttered, smiling in spite of himself.

Askin' Wayne

I'm a new parent with an infant, and I've been thinking about how to handle certain childhood traditions as my child grows up. The one I'm most unsure about is Santa Claus. My partner and I both grew up with Santa and remember it fondly, but also feel conflicted about presenting something as real when it isn't (even if it's meant to be harmless fun). We'd like to raise our child in an environment of mutual respect and transparency—isn't one of the biggest initial cracks in a child's trust finding out that their parents have been conspiring to dupe them into believing a jolly old wizard is always watching them? The more I think about it, the creepier it gets!

At the same time, we both worry that choosing not to include Santa could make our child feel left out around other kids and cause tension with other young parents. Is the magic of Christmas worth the deception?—*WHAT-IFS ROASTING IN A FUTURE LIAR*

WHAT-IFS—Ah, the perennial question: do I waste an advice columnist's time by asking about the most-well tread topic in the business, or do I pose the question to **Microsoft Bing** and risk reading more than 1000 words in a single day?

Having chosen the former option, it is clear that you and your business partner are cloistered in some manner of old-timey spiritualist colony and wish to reap the benefits of the modern public school system. This is an excellent strategy, as your child will go mostly unobserved in its efforts to convert their pudgy, sour-smelling peers to your strange belief system. With that in mind, I'd first advise caution. Santa Claus will be the least of their worries.

When the **Coca-Cola** corporation cast this sanguine egregore into existence, it was for one noble goal: marketing their product to the widest audience possible. And to what great success! Their assorted slurries of addictive chemical compounds have led to incredible advances in obesity rates and insulin prices. As an Orthodox Economist, I hold Santa in the same estimation as your strange clan does whatever former Millerite locked your grandmothers in a horse stable and forced them to read his diary: a being of pure magic and wonder.

If you were able to schlep it 20 miles to the nearest incorporated community's public library to send me this mewling query, they'll soon be privy to the many other thoughtforms that haunt children's imaginations. Nowadays, families place a wooden poppet on a ledge to stare at their child and remind them that the fae are always keeping an eye out for potential changelings. Parents fill their fat little cornbags' imaginations with tales of frosted golems and mutated cervids. They screen humiliation rituals of wealthy, successful men hallucinating the nightmarish world in which the overbreeding of destitute Catholics is held morally superior to an austere, ascetic existence in service of merchant capital, and laugh at grotesque depictions of ogres celebrating the holiday with braying beasts (what lie with dragons)!

Don't lie to your children! While I don't support your backwoods faith, it behooves me to admit that you'll do more harm than good shielding them from the many awesome and terrifying figures comprising the modern Christmas ritual. In their mind, who would win? Some piss-pants hick who thinks he can convince a couple dozen families he is Jesus incarnate, or the tag-team of Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson and Vernon "Red One" Schillinger?

Your options will be limited, though. The first, most pragmatic course of action is to send them to an orphanage so they may be integrated into global capital. Assuming you desire to retain the numbers of your unwashed flock, you may be better off crafting your **own** holiday figure.

Consult the Goetia for any demons particularly associated with Satareil, the third qlippoth. Any being practiced in deceit, concealment, and obfuscation would be happy to take on the mask of a beloved children's character to destroy order and cloud comprehension. For example, did you know there aren't any animated Christmas specials featuring Moloch?

Don't worry about the parents of their classmates—most modern families worship Moloch in one form or another, and as their children's dreams are darkened by visions of a 600-foot-tall minotaur capped with a seasonally-festive tricorne (don't use the classic red stocking cap—you're trying to *weaken* the Claus egregore) and their soft wishes for candy-canes and Playstations become hollered demands for the blood of mother Earth, they'll realize that Santa, Frosty, Rudolf, Brown the Holiday Stain, and Buddy the Elf are just momentary glimpses at the ever-shifting face of the one true god: **me!**

"Waxen" Wayne

RED ONE IS STREAMING EXCLUSIVELY ON AMAZON PRIME

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Need advice? Send your darkest dilemmas to waxenwayne@gmail.com.

Find us at waxen.org and @readwaxen where available.

To whomever sent the following email: **how is your dreaming?**

Dear editor,

On October 23rd of 2025 I was approached by a strange man in a karaoke bar during a friend's birthday. He seemed scatterbrained. His sentences ran on a little too long, and when he talked his voice would speed up and slow down like warped cassette tape. He looked sick. Pale. Sweaty.

At first I didn't think anything of it. The bar is in a rough part of town and all sorts of folks come through. It's the kind of place you can find anything you'd need, and I could immediately tell this guy needed a drink. I got him a beer and left him at the bar, but right before I could step away he grabbed me by the shoulders and pulled me close.

"There's nothing inside," he whispered.

His voice sounded like static. When I pushed him away my head started pounding and I heard my name called on the speakers. I was supposed to sing "Rambling Man" but instead I threw up in the bathroom. When I got out, he was gone.

I found this piece of paper crumpled up in my coat pocket when I got home.
I don't know how it got there.

—*R.*

CLASSIFIED

Message from the *Interdimensional* Centers of Pestilence

Open the space with the appropriate rituals.
Banishing Rituals of the **Pentagram** | Middle **Pillar** |
Banishing Ritual of the **Hexagram.**

Write this **inscription** and symbol on a piece of bare parchment, vellum or lambskin in **red ink.**

Place it upon the altar and fumigate the temple with incense of rose or **sweet** scents. Honey, vanilla, frankincense, etc.

Become centered and grounded with **deep** breaths.
Quiet the mind. Enter silence.

Recite this **invocation** while holding the drawn symbol **over** the incense's smoke.
Imagine your words **expanding** into the universe:

ἐγώ ἡ ψυχὴ κόσμου ἐκ Ὄνειρος Νυκτός.	Ego ee psookheh kozmu ex oneiros nuktos.
ὁ ἄθλος ἐμός εἰς φῶς τήτῦμος γνῶσῖς.	Ho athelos emos eis phos tei tymos noeisis .
ἐγώ καλέω Νυκτός! ἐγώ δέομαι Νυκτός! δός	Ego keleyo nuktos! Ego deyomai nuktos!
μοι ὁ θεοφάνεια σοῦ ἐξ!	Dos emoi ho theophany soo ex!
δωρεῖ μοι γνῶσις σοῦ ὁ Νυκτός!	Dorehoh emoi noeisis sou ho nuktos!
δωρεῖ μοι γνῶσις σοῦ ἡ θεία ουσία!	Doreoh emoi noesis soo eh theia ousia!
ἐγώ κλῆσις σύ ἔλευσῖς εἰς τὸ Ὄνειροι μου!	Ego klesis su elusius eis to oneiroy mou!

Store the written symbol in a cool, dark place.
At night, **place** the sigil **under** you pillow.
Before falling asleep perform box-breathing or pranayama exercises while vibrating NYX for at least 13 minutes.

Record your dreams.

BEV AND BOB WOULD LIKE TO THANK WAXEN'S CONTRIBUTORS FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE THEIR WONDROUS AND FRIGHTENING GIFTS WITH THE WORLD:

Daniel Roop's speculative work received an Honorable Mention in Best Horror of the Year Vol. 17, and has been featured in publications including *Apex Magazine* and *Pseudopod*. "The Whitworth Shearing" will continue in our next volume.

David-Baptiste Chirot was a Vermont-raised artist and poet who left this world in 2021. He, sadly, remains an undersung legend in zine/punk art history.

Sarah Yount-Moser has been crafting and exploring artistic mediums for the better part of her life. Her affinity for the darker aspects of life and death manifests through her creations to this day.

James Cannice is a writer from the San Francisco Bay Area. His short fiction has appeared in *Allegory*, *Tales to Terrify*, *Crow and Cross Keys*, and other venues. He currently resides in Los Angeles.

Anthony Christopher is his mother's favorite Chicago artist. *Waxen* agrees. Find more of his impeccably detailed work at **AnthonyChristopherart.com** and Instagram (**@anthonychristopherart**).

Arvee Fantilagan grew up in the Philippines, lives in Japan, and has more of his works available to read at **sites.google.com/view/arveef**. He hopes to write a better bio someday.

Lucia Castro's bylines can be found scattered across several Northeastern Pennsylvania newspapers. She advises readers to use responsibly and donate to the **National Harm Reduction Coalition**.

You can find **Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece**'s strange shorts in places like *Weird Horror*, *Exacting Clam*, and others. Her weird horror novella, *Poltergeist*, was published by Apocalypse Confidential.

After our request to plug more of their incredible work, Brazillian artist **Rafael Camilo**'s pen-and-ink magic can now be found on Instagram at **@nanquimseco**

Jayden Wood's wonderfully textured and weird medieval-influenced illustrations can be found on Instagram at **@pigeon_watching_** and woodcuts salvaged in the future post-apocalyptic wilds of Canada.

Limerick, Ireland's **Jack Fennell** is a writer, researcher, and the editor of three fiction anthologies - *A Brilliant Void*, *It Rose Up*, and *Your Own Dark Shadow*. In 2022, he won the European Science Fiction Society award for Best Translator.